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ПРОЕКТНАЯ РАБОТА

Exploring the diversity of English: an overview of the most and the least understandable dialects and accents for Russian high school students

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Table of Contents

Introduction 3
1. CHAPTER I. Theoretical Part 5
1.1 Choosing the accents for the booklet 5
1.2 Explaining transcription 7
1.3 Explaining pronunciation 9
2. CHAPTER II. Practical Part 13
2.1 Conducting a Survey 13
2.2 The Results of the Survey 13
2.3 Analysis of the Results 14
3. Conclusion 17
Reference List 18

Introduction

Our survey revealed that a significant majority of classmates (87.5%) intend to travel or study abroad, relying on their knowledge of English. However, we recognize potential challenges in comprehending the speech of residents from the British Isles and other English-speaking regions. While English is an official language in numerous countries, its regional variants often differ substantially from the standardized form taught in Russian schools.

When selecting travel destinations, we observed that tourism websites rarely highlight these linguistic variations. To address this gap, we propose conducting independent research to analyze key differences in global English dialects. The findings will be compiled into an informational booklet designed to assist young Russian travelers.

This resource aims to mitigate communication barriers, ensuring that high school students can navigate foreign environments more confidently. By familiarizing users with common phonological, lexical, and grammatical variations, the booklet will enhance cross-cultural interactions and reduce the risk of misunderstandings.

Aim: To classify the dialects of English based on their complexity/ease of understanding for Russian teenagers.

Objectives:

1. To define the range of studied countries.
2. To study the existing research on the topic.
3. To learn about the differences in dialects and accents.

4. To create a survey in which participants will listen to audio samples of dialects and complete forms with a comprehension scale and space for additional comments.
5. To conduct a survey among the target audience: high school students with Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate level of English.
6. To analyze and systemize the data, make the rating of dialects according to the ease of their comprehensibility.
7. To present the collected data in a form of a booklet (printable online version)

Methods: Internet research, studying media, literature and audio resources, survey, comparison, analysis, description.

Intended results:

Creation of a booklet with English accents in different countries, that may help Russian adolescents in choosing the right travelling destination and will inform them about potential difficulties.

Hypothesis: Preliminary observations suggest that speakers from European countries where English holds official language status (e.g., Ireland, Malta) may exhibit higher mutual intelligibility with learners of Standard English. This idea stems from the comparative proximity of their educational systems and media to the Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American norms typically emphasized in Russian EFL instruction.

Conversely, we anticipate greater comprehension challenges among respondents interacting with speakers from English-Spanish bilingual regions. Such contexts often feature pronounced phonological interference (e.g., syllable-timing vs. stress-timing), lexical borrowings, and code-switching practices that deviate from standardized classroom models. Empirical

validation of these hypotheses will form a key component of our forthcoming study.

1. CHAPTER I. Theoretical Part

1.1 Choosing the accents for the booklet

The first list was made with the idea of including countries of all parts of the world and of different languages. The initial variant was:

1. Argentina (Spanish)
2. Australia (English)
3. Austria (German)
4. Belgium (Dutch, French, German)
5. Brazil (Portuguese)
6. Bulgaria (Bulgarian)
7. Canada (English, French)
8. China (Mandarin)
9. Colombia (Spanish)
10. Cuba (Spanish)
11. Czechia (Czech)
12. Denmark (Danish)
13. Dominican Republic (Spanish)
14. Ecuador (Spanish)
15. Egypt (Arabic)
16. Finland (Finnish, Swedish)
17. France (French)
18. Germany (German)
19. Ghana (English)
20. Greece (Greek)
21. Honduras (Spanish)
22. Hungary (Hungarian)
23. India (Hindi, English)
24. Indonesia (Indonesian)

25. Ireland (Irish, English)
26. Israel (Hebrew, Arabic)
27. Italy (Italian)
28. Japan (Japanese)
29. Mexico (Spanish)
30. Moldova (Romanian)
31. Morocco (Arabic, Amazigh)
32. Netherlands (Dutch)
33. New Zealand (English, Māori, New Zealand Sign Language)
34. Norway (Norwegian)
35. Peru (Spanish)
36. Portugal (Portuguese)
37. Romania (Romanian)
38. Saudi Arabia (Arabic)
39. Serbia (Serbian)
40. Singapore (English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil)
41. Spain (Spanish)
42. Sweden (Swedish)
43. Switzerland (German, French, Italian, Romansh)
44. UAE (Arabic)
45. UK (English)
46. USA (English)

The countries under analysis were systematically categorized according to three key criteria:

1) **English Proficiency[1]:** Rankings were derived from the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), specifically focusing on the "Under-21[2]" cohort to align with our target demographic.

[1] (EF)
[2] (U21)

2) **Tourism Demand:** Positions were cross-referenced with leading travel destination rankings (e.g., UNWTO or Euromonitor International reports[3]) to assess prevalence among young travelers.

3) **Socioeconomic Development:** The Human Development Index (HDI)[4] served as a proxy for infrastructure and accessibility, factors critical to tourist experiences.

Nations lacking sufficient data across these metrics were excluded to ensure methodological consistency and relevance. This tripartite filtering process yielded a focused dataset for subsequent linguistic and cultural analysis.

A supplementary survey was administered to adolescent respondents (aged 15-18) to identify their preferences regarding English accent comprehension. Participants were asked to select countries whose linguistic variations they deemed most relevant for practical guidance.

Only destinations chosen by >38% of respondents advanced to the final analysis. The selected countries represent four geographic regions:

Africa: Ghana, Nigeria

Americas: Brazil, Argentina

Asia: UAE, India, Singapore, Japan, China

Europe: Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Switzerland

1.2 Explaining transcription

To explain the pronunciation we are going to use the International Phonetic Alphabet.

[3] (tourism)
[4] (HDI)

According to IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) [5] there are **20 vowel sounds** in English language. They can be split into smaller groups:

- Diphthong vowels (so-called double vowels):
- /eɪ/-place, /ɪə/-clear, /eə/-care, /aɪ/-find, /ʊə/-tour, /ɔɪ/-boy, /oʊ/-home, /aʊ/-mouse.
- Monophthongs have two groups:
- Long vowels have /:/ after them: /i:/-week, /ɑ:/-hard, /ɜ:/-heard, /ɔ:/-fork, /u:/-boot.
- Short vowels: /ɪ/-pit, /e/-pet, /æ/-pat, /ə/-about, /ʌ/-cut, /ʊ/-put, /ɒ/-dog.

There are **24 consonant sounds**. They can be voiced or unvoiced. When pronouncing an unvoiced consonant, no vibration or voice required. Examples of unvoiced consonant sounds are /s/, /p/ and /t/. With a voiced consonant there is voice or vibration when the sound is pronounced. Voiced consonant sounds are:

/**l**/ - love /lʌv/, well /wel/e

/**m**/ - mail /meɪl/, some /sʌm/

/**n**/ - fine /faɪn/, funny /'fʌ.ni/

/**ŋ**/ - sing /sɪŋ/, singer /'sɪ.ŋə/

/**h**/ - heal /hi:l/, perhaps /pə'hæps/

/**r**/ - real /ri:l/, correct /kə'rekt/

/**j**/ - you /ju:/, beyond /bi'jɒnd/

/**w**/ - we /wi/, showing /'ʃoʊ.wɪŋ/

A **consonant pair** is when one mouth position is able to make two sounds - unvoiced and voiced. They are:

/**p**/ - cup/kʌp/ & /**b**/- trouble/'trʌ.bəl/

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[5] (ipa)

/**t**/ - letter /'le.tə/ & /**d**/ ladder /'læ.də/

/**k**/ - came /keɪm/, back /bæk/ & /**g**/ - game /geɪm/, bag /bæg/

/**f**/ - fine /faɪn/, off /ɒf/ & /**v**/ - vine /vaɪn/, of /ɒv/

/**θ**/ - thin /θɪn/, method /'me.θəd/ & /**ð**/ - then /ðen/, other /'ʌ.ðə/

/**s**/ - missing /'mɪ.sɪŋ/, face /feɪs/ & /**z**/ - zoo /zu:/, phase /feɪz/

/**ʃ**/- rush /rʌʃ/ & /**ʒ**/ measure /'me.ʒə/

/**tʃ**/ choke /tʃoʊk/ & /**dʒ**/ - joke /dʒoʊk/

Dialectology: This field studies the variations in language, including dialects. Researchers like Hans Kurath and William Labov have made significant contributions to understanding regional dialects

1.3 Explaining pronunciation

Argentina

Ahh-s, misspelling /eə/ as /ɑ:/ and /ʌ/, /ə/ as /ɜ:/, pronouncing unspoken e-s in the end of sentences (mostly as /e/, /æ/, /ə/ or /ɜ:/)

prolonged e in there&where, fullstops in the middle, clɔth /‘difhə‘rænt/ instead of ['dɪfɹənt], /dif’fɜ:r/ instead of ['dɪfə], ['teri:’tɔ:rɪ] instead of /t'ɛɹɪtəɹˌi/, porridge, : /p'ɒɹɪdʒ/, unimalь fʌmili, either-i:there unsanitary- un‘sʌnɪtʊərɪ odd- ɜ:dd

Brasil

Daily as dehli, porridge as porish, hurry- /‘h u:rrɪ/, five : /f'aɪf/, thought th ʌ:t, only- /ɜ:nl ɪ/, long- lʌŋ

/ʌ/ instead of /e/, pronounces all as it is spelled

Eh-s s-z, f-v non-release of final word plosives

ɜ:→e, y→j, **o→ɜ:**, five - /f'aɪf/

high /ʌ/ in Ahh-s

Spain & Italy

Many /’mɛ ni/, th as pf, b /ə/th instead of bath, each - /ɪəʃ/ un- /æn/, a lot of- /ʌ/ /l ɔ:t/ /ɔ:h/, /‘dɪfer’nt/ instead of ['dɪfɹənt], food as /f ɔ:d/

strong h-s and r-s[6] variety - /vʌ ‘raɪə tɪ/

India

The expression 'Indian English' is commonly used, though in accurately, to refer not only to the English spoken in India but also to that of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, as well as to that spoken by those originating in these areas but now living in such places as South Africa, East Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain.

Anglo-Indian accent, chee-chee accent, stands between RP and educated Indian English.

/d/← /t/ in the ed - endings

/d ʒ /=/z/

/v/ + /w/= [ʊ]

no /ʒ/, use /ʃ/ rarely

The voiceless plosives, /p, t, k/ , are unaspirated in all positions: pay, tie, come.

/gh/ is pronounced as spelled

Switzerland

Swiss accent is diverse as there are 4 national languages: Swiss German, Swiss French, Swiss Italian, and Romansh. The most influential is Swiss German, widely known for strong guttural h sound.

sh, ch, h sound harsh and throaty

"w" may sound like "v" and vice versa

Strong "r" sound, sometimes trilled

/ɪ/→/iː/, /e/→/ə/, /ɒ/→/ɔ:/, /ʊ/→/u:/, k→ch

[6] (Busa, 1999)

/θ/ is interchangeable with /ð/&/z/

lack diphthongs and often stress the first syllable

Greece

strong H-s, strange r-s

sheep /iː/ & ship (/ɪ/) has no difference

/s/ is replaced by "sh" /ʃ/ or vice versa

speak fast

France

There they speak French and are known to be proficient

h, r-dropping, ch → sh, Guttural French-like r-s, th→s/z/t/d[7]

Finland

Noticeable first-syllable stress, relatively flat intonation, poor diphthongs and vowel length distinctions (sit=seat)

/w/→/v/, sh at the beginning → /s/, /θ/ and /ð/→/t/ or /d/

China

They use pinyin- based on English letters transcription of Chinese characters. Therefore, Chinese often pronounce english sounds as chinese pinyin. So r→ something like zh in the beginnings like ruby, red, rare. X, q, and j may sound whooshing and soft. Also tonal structure of Chinese influences how Chinese speakers produce English intonation and stress.[8]

th→ /s/ or /t/

Japan

they tend to add extra vowel sounds at the end of words- o or a

/r/= /l/

Singapore

English is one of four official languages, the others being Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), and Tamil.

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[7] (Charpentier-Jiménez, 2019)

[8] (Kachru, 2006)

non-release of word-final plosives (ъ)

interchange /s/ and /j/, not distinguish /r/ from /l/ (Chinese), /f/ from /p/ (Malay), or /v/ from /w/ (Indian).[9]

United Arabic emirates

Arabic-influenced rhythm and pronunciation, with some sounds adapted from Arabic phonology.

d/= /t/

Ghana & Nigeria

Nigerian English generally uses the vowel /ɪ/ or /i:/ where Ghanaian English might use /a/

specific consonantal realizations: the voiceless alveolo-palatal sibilant [ɕ] for /ʃ/ (as in "ship"), the voiceless alveolo-palatal affricate [tɕ] for /tʃ/ (as in "cheese"), and the voiced alveolo-palatal affricate [dʑ] for /dʒ/ (as in "general")

[9] (Wells, 1982)

2. CHAPTER II. Practical Part

2.1 Conducting a Survey

The survey was conducted using the Google Forms platform. Respondents were invited to join the project's Telegram channel to listen to audio recordings. Afterward, they rated their comprehension of the recordings on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicated the highest level of clarity.

To date, the survey has been completed by **14 high school students** (grades 9–11). Among them, 9 students are at level B1, 4 at level B2, and 1 at level C2 (based on the CEFR[10] scale).

The questionnaire included 14 comprehension questions — one for each audio recording. Additionally, there was one question to assess the respondent's language proficiency level, and a special space for comments and feedback.

A total of **7 respondents** requested a **research findings booklet**.

2.2 The Results of the Survey

Japan – Even distribution from levels 1 to 9, with peaks at levels 6–7 (40%).

India – 29% of respondents rated recordings at levels 9–10, while 71% rated them between levels 1 and 5.

Singapore – Even distribution from levels 4 to 10, with peaks at levels 4 and 6.

China – Even distribution from levels 1 to 9, with peaks at levels 4–5 (36%).

Finland – Peaks at levels 1–2 and 4–5 (36% each), and also at level 8 (21%).

[10] (cambrige)

Switzerland – 64% of responses at levels 1–5, and 36% at levels 8–9.

Greece (surveyed twice):

- First survey: 43% rated levels 1–3 and 6–8.
- Second survey: 28% rated levels 1–3; 72% rated levels 7–9.

France – 50% rated levels 1–3, and 35% rated levels 8–10.

Italy and Spain – 43% at levels 1–3, 29% at level 8.

Brazil – 43% at levels 1–3, 21% at level 7; the remaining responses were evenly distributed across levels 5–9.

United Arab Emirates – 50% at levels 1–3; the remainder evenly distributed from levels 4 to 10.

Ghana and Nigeria – Even distribution across levels 1–10, with peaks at levels 1, 4, 7, and 9.

Argentina – Even distribution from levels 1 to 9, with peaks at levels 1, 3, 6, 9.

2.3 Analysis of the Results

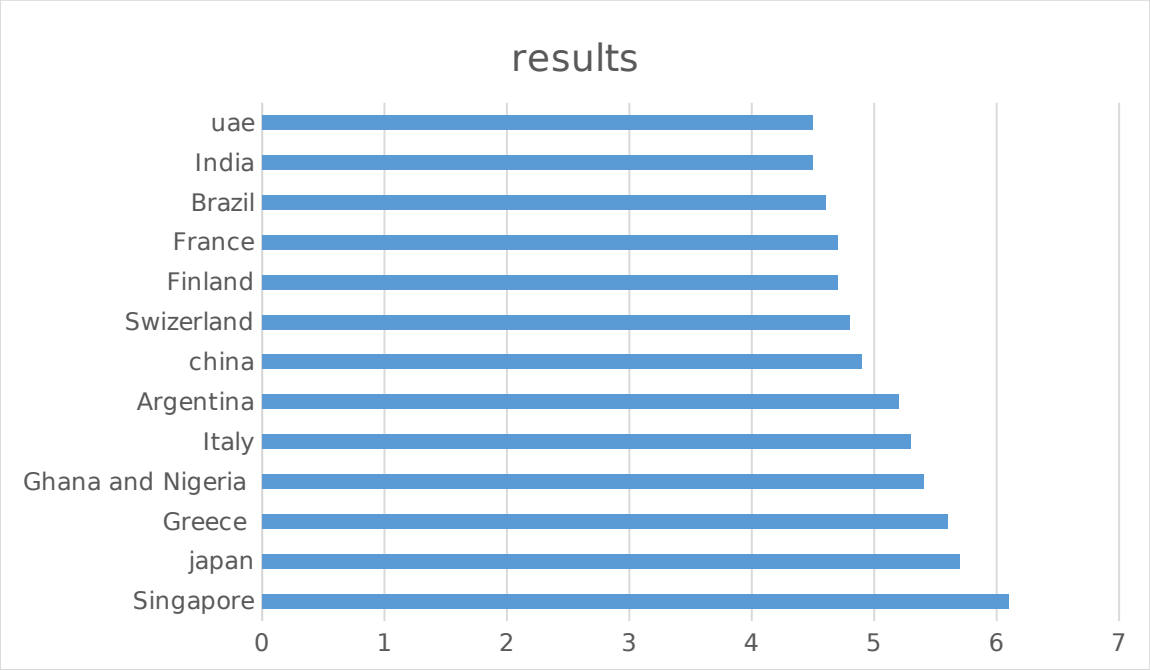
Preliminary findings indicate significant variation in perceived accent difficulty across regions. Far Asian English varieties (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) emerged as the most challenging for comprehension, followed by African and Romance language-influenced varieties (e.g., Brazilian, Argentinian). Notably, these observed patterns appear largely independent of learners' proficiency levels (B1-B2 CEFR), as within-group variance exceeded between-group differences in our data.

A paradoxical trend emerged when comparing subjective comprehensibility ratings with objective English proficiency metrics. While Singapore and Greece rank highest in EF EPI

scores (indicating strong institutional English proficiency), survey respondents rated these varieties as particularly challenging to comprehend. Conversely, UAE and Brazilian English, despite lower EF EPI rankings, were perceived as more intelligible. This discrepancy suggests that institutional proficiency metrics may not fully capture phonological features affecting real-world comprehension.

Two notable outliers were observed in the Asian cohort: despite nearly identical EF EPI scores, Japanese and Chinese English varieties differed by a full point (1.0) on our comprehensibility scale. This divergence warrants further phonological analysis, particularly regarding L1 transfer effects in prosody and segmental features.

The results of the survey may be observed in the graph below (picture 1), where 1 represents the easiest accent to comprehend, and 7 – the hardest one.



Picture 1

The results of the survey have been arranged in the form of an informative booklet (Pictures 2-3) which is available in the form of a printable pdf-version in the Telegram channel dedicated to the project work: @EnglishAccentsProject.

Picture 2

Picture 3

3. Conclusion

This study sought to classify varieties of English according to their comprehensibility for Russian-speaking adolescents and develop an educational booklet based on the findings. The research was conducted in three phases.

First, we administered a survey to identify which English accents were of greatest interest to our target audience. Based on the results, we selected specific countries for further analysis and collected authentic audio recordings of native speakers from these regions.

Next, we conducted a perceptual survey in which Russian teenagers listened to these recordings and rated their comprehensibility on a standardized scale. The survey data was then analyzed to identify patterns in accent perception across different English varieties.

Our initial hypothesis regarding European accents being more comprehensible was only partially supported, since many European countries' accents happened to be more complicated than we predicted. Notably, we observed discrepancies between official English proficiency rankings (such as EF EPI scores) and actual comprehensibility ratings. While Singapore and Greece scored highly on proficiency scales, their accents were rated as difficult to understand. Conversely, accents from the UAE and Brazil, despite lower proficiency scores, were perceived as more comprehensible.

The resulting booklet serves multiple purposes:

- preparation for English language competitions;
- assistance in selecting study abroad destinations;

- accent familiarization for prospective emigrants.

The materials are available through our Telegram channel @EnglishAccentsProject. To our knowledge, this represents the first comprehensive study focusing specifically on the accent comprehension challenges faced by Russian-speaking adolescents, making it particularly relevant for this demographic.

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